DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 289 591 PS 017 021

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TITLE Providing Reliable Information to Parents.
PUB DATE 31 Aug 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (95th, New York, NY, August 31, 1987).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Rearing; *Diffusion (Communication); Information Dissemination; Linking Agents; *Parent Education; *Professional Services; *Psychologists; *Research Utilization

ABSTRACT

It has been shown that providing meaningful information to parents helps them to make better child rearing decisions. Considerable literature indicates that parents will often alter their behavior when they see that improved relationships with their children result. Psychologists have an important role to play in communicating to the public that advice about certain child rearing practices is supported by findings of scientific studies, whereas certain widely accepted ideas about child rearing have proven to be untrue. Trained psychologists will be respected for helping parents who cannot interpret scientific validity. Psychologists who lead the way in presenting fundamental information to parents will increase the status of psychologists in general, as well as that of the field of psychology. (RH)

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PROVIDING RELIABLE INFORMATION TO PARENTS

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Presented at 95th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Assocation at New York City, August 1987. Monday, August 31, 3-3:50 P.M. Rotunda, New York Hilton (The American Media Association subsection).

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PROVIDING RELIABLE INFORMATION TO PARENTS

Rhoda L. Fisher and Seymour Fisher

It has been demonstrated that providing meaningful information to parents helps them to make more rational decisions regarding childrearing. There is considerable literature showing that parents will often alter their responses to their children when they can see that improved relationships are likely to follow.

Psychologists can communicate to the public that there are things that are pretty well verified with regard to childrearing. Scientific work has discovered some reliable principles that will help in rearing children. Certain widely accepted ideas about childrearing have proven not to be true.

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Providing Reliable Information to Parents

Rhoda Lee Fisher, PhD

As the go-betweens in information processing we the media people, are charged with the task of moving material from the experts, from the very fronts of science, to the consumer, to the plain old person,- even plain old parent out there. Whatever our specialty area, if we, for example chose to present issues to do with prevention, then in fact, we should be evaluating the materials coming in, for their dependability. And in so doing we should be able to define some of the prime issues.

Let's look at some of the prime issues regarding child rearing: Certainly nothing requires more skill than being an effective parent. It ranks amongst the most demanding and complex? A list of all the problems facing the average mother or father would be endless. Every day a parent has to make decisions about issues such as: how much freedom to allow their child; whether to punish or not punish; whether to be protective or give a nudge toward independence; whether to expect loyalty to one's values as compared

to more "modern" ones; and how much information to transmit about sex, human frailty, and the secret recesses of the body. It would seem reasonable to have as much help as possible in making such tough decisions. This is evident in the energetic way most parents have read books offering advice about child rearing. Parents have also, by the thousands, enrolled in courses that would presumably make them wiser about how to cope with their children's problems. Each year, too, great numbers consult child treatment centers and various clinical experts for help in dealing with seemingly overwhelming difficulties that plague their relations with their children.

We, as experts in the field of family relationships should be providing information and guidance to mothers and fathers that will help them approach some of those tricky dilemnas that they face each day. We should express our indignation and astonishment at the way self-styled experts offer courses and books to the public about how to raise children that are founded on little more than personal opinions and experiences. Several widely disseminated books giving detailed and confident advice to parents have lacked elementary scientific credibility. None the least is Dr. Benjamin Spock who like other self styled experts have urged that we swallow their presecriptions for child care purely on their say-so. They assure us, on the basis of their private speculations or vignettes

from their clinical experiences, that they are in a position to give us sound information. It is surprising- and perhaps a measure of the prevailing hunger for guidance- how many parents have been willing to adopt new ways of dealing with their children in terms of such fragile assurances.

It would seem to be important in shaping the lives of our children that we should want to act only in the light of information known to be dependable. I would go even one step farther and say that the seal of dependability must ultimately come from scientific study.

As an example, we know that psychoanalytically oriented advisors argue that parental behavior is determined by unconscious motives and attitudes, acquired early in life, that are almost impossible to change- except by extraordinary methods like experiencing several years of psychoanalytic psychotherapy. No real evidence exists for this pessimistic position. If it were true, it would represent a unique state of affairs. There is no other area of human behavior in which giving people increased meaningful information does not help them to make more rational decisions. Actually, more and more evidence has come to us that people with specific problems (like a child who repreatedly has temper tantrums, or a child with toilet training difficulties) can cope better with them when simply given pertinent information and

much of which is covered in the book my husband & I wrote "What We Really Know About Child-rearing" published by Crowson in 1986.

direct advice. There is now a considerable literature showing that parents will often alter their responses to their children when they can see that improved relationships are likely to follow. Scientific publications dealing with behavior therapy and parent-training procedures attest to this. While unconscious feelings no doubt play a sizeable role in what parents do, their behavior is also affected by how well they understand the consequences of different courses of action.

Perhaps we can unravel what is known about about such matters as: the effects of different kinds of discipline; the way to raise children who are like ourselves and yet sufficiently different to be real individuals; and the attitudes that foster emotional stability in our sons and daughters. We need to take up other matters such as what determines the ability of a child to achieve in school; the factors shaping the child's masculinity or femininity; and the impact of a mother or father being away from the family for long periods of time.

Most books about raising children start out by setting the stage with "The Parent" and "The Child." They portray the parent as being somewhere in their home; nearby is the offspring, who is somehow troubling the parent or creating a problem that needs to be solved. They treat the situation as if parent and child existed in virtual isolation- as if there were just the two of them in a

domestic vacuum. The advice offered is often strongly colored by this view. Generally, a sense of the importance of the parent individual decisions as a major determinant in what happens to the child. The way in which the stage is set with "The Parent" and "The Child" does sound fairly plausible. After all, parents repeatedly find themselves in situations in which there are just parent and child, whose behavior calls for a decision or judgment. But one has to consider the possibility that there has been too much slick oversimplifications of the nature of the parent-child relationship. This has led not only to a good deal of unrealistic action, but also to senseless guilt on the part of the parents.

"What We Really Know About Childrearing we demonstrate that scientific

There is now convincing scientific information indicating that the behavior of both parent and child is strongly influenced by the family system in which they are a part. Pschologically, neither parent nor child ever really acts as a self-contained unit. The way in which a parent deals with their child cannot be well understood without seeing both of them as members of a family, in which there is delicate interdependence and mutual influence. Further, parent and child are members of larger community, and their behavior may at times be sharply affected by what is happening "out there." The assassination of President Kennedy set off shock waves that were likely felt in almost every household in the United States. There is scientific documentation that the

event increased anxiety in many families and confronted parents with the task of clarifying for their children the meaning of violence and death. It is also obvious to parents that the TV set is a channel that constantly brings messages and images to their children that can affect them. Parents who had to get up in the middle of the night to soothe a child frightened because he or she couldn't shake off the vision of a TV monster understand the power of outside influences on their children only too well.

And lastly to stand firmly behind what is factual will contribute to the well being of our listeners. By example, let me mention the effects of harsh punishment. Studies are very clear that if you punish your child in an overly harsh punitive manner you must know that you will have bad effects on your child. The highly punished child comes to see his parents as enemies; he feels chronically angry and he develops the idea that either extreme submissiveness or extremely angry resitiveness are the only two ways to deal with people. It has been found that disturbed children and delinquents more often come from families in which severe punishment is used.

I guess I'm really talking to the importance of coming to independent and evaluative positions. We are trained people and we will be respected for helping parents who cannot interpret

scientific validity. Leading the way in presenting fundamental information cannot but increase our status and the status of our field in general.